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MEDIA CONTACTS
Jared Touchin | 928.221.9253
Jolene Holgate | 928.308.4174
Chrissy Largo | 928.637.5603
nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approve grant for Alamo/Tohajiilee Veterans Outreach Initiative

WINDOW ROCK – Last Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approved Legislation No. 0017-14, approving approximately \$673,000 to fund the Alamo/Tohajiilee Healing to Wellness Court for the Veterans Outreach Initiative beginning October 1, 2013 to September 30, 2016.

Regina Roanhorse, a court administrator with the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, spoke on behalf of the 11 judicial districts and said the Veterans Outreach Initiative is a product of the C Task 11, which is an established drug court for veterans, now called a “healing to wellness court.”

“We developed a really strong relationship within the veteran’s administration to try to connect their efforts with culturally appropriated services that needed our help,” stated Roanhorse.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) said the Veterans Outreach Program would be the first of its kind within Indian Country and the United States.

“For me, I am for anything that can support our Veterans when they come home and this is a start even though it is in the area of Tohajiilee and Alamo, a remote area of the Navajo Nation. We can expand off of this and be able to bring some more Veterans Outreach Programs towards Navajo Nation. With your support, it will pave the way for future endeavors,” stated Delegate Shepherd.

According to the narrative submitted by the Alamo-Tohajiilee District Court, behavioral services are essential to health, that prevention works, and that treatment is a challenge but people can recover if they have access to services.

“We are finding out a lot of Navajo veterans have benefits through [Veterans Assistance] or through their own medical insurance, but they are not applying those benefits. They are not accessing these services and in order to access these services, it has to have a coordinator which leads to the Veterans Outreach Program,” stated Roanhorse.

Based on the narrative, there are 1,205,056 Native American Veterans in the United States and of that are 206,267 Navajo veterans.

“What we want is a tribal action plan that will invite our health providers to get people that have mental health issues, drug addiction and substance abuse addiction, which is co-occurring

disorders, to build a partnership to work effectively and efficiency to provide access for rehabilitation,” stated Roanhorse.

Veterans access to mental health and substance abuse services which include screening and clinical assessments are difficult to initiate at the local and federal level, according to Roanhorse.

Based on the narrative, 17% of combat veterans develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other co-occurring illnesses that go untreated, therefore, it places veterans at a higher risk of being involved in the justice system.

“Certainly looks like a program that could pave the way for establishing a model that can be replicated,” stated HEHSC member Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill).

The HEHSC members approved the legislation with a vote of 4-0.

Legislation No. 0017-14 now goes to the Budget and Finance Committee for final consideration.

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